

THE MATHA ARCHIVES AND THEIR PROBLEMS

G. S. Dikshit

Scope

My remarks are based primarily on my acquaintance of the records of the Sringeri *Matha* and on what I have read about the records of a few other *Mathas*. But these remarks may apply to the archives of the *Mathas* and temples belonging to various Hindu and Jaina sects and probably they may have a bearing on the records in the custody of the religious institutions of the Sikhs, the Muslim and the Christians.

Importance of the *Matha* Archives

The more important *Mathas* have a longer history than many dynasties which have ruled this country. For example, the Sringeri *Mathas* has a continuous history from Sankaracharya viz., the eighth century. Its records are more or less continuous from 1346 to the present day. The other Sankaracharya *Mathas* in different parts of the country have similar long histories. The Gokarna-Partagali *Matha* has records which go to the sixteenth century. The Jangamawadi *Matha* in Varanasi has records in Persian, Nagari and Kannada of the days of Shah Jahan viz. 1655.

The *Matha* archives are one of the most important but neglected sources of medieval and early modern history. Religion and religious practices dominated traditional Indian life which can be understood only in the light of these archives. But hardly any study based on records of the religious institutions showing the under-currents that affected economic, social and political and cultural life has been made. The *Mathas*, in earlier times, were like states within states. Like state records, they contain the genealogy of their rulers, the Pontiffs and their system of administration. The income of the *Mathas* was derived from land and cash grants from rulers and individuals. The *Mathas* had to get their lands cultivated through tenants. We have naturally information about tenures, crops and prices. Economic condition of the different classes of the people and their professions can also be found out from these records.

The *Mathas* discharged some of the functions which now are carried out by governments. Such functions included punishment of criminals. They looked after the less privileged classes of society like the slaves, orphans, widows and untouchables. The *Gurus* were learned men and promoted learning by maintaining schools and libraries and by holding conferences of learned men and honouring those who distinguished themselves in such conferences. In fact, nowhere is traditional learning better preserved than in the *Mathas*. Naturally, the records throw light on the educational activities of the times.

Location of the *Mathas*

Granted that the *Matha* archives are valuable where does one find their history. In the old Mysore state, the Muzrai department was entrusted with the administration of the revenues of religious and charitable institutions belonging to Hindus and Muslims such as temples, *Chattrams*, *Mathas*,

Musjids, Dargas etc. This department contained a complete list of all the *Mathas* in the state. The charity Commissioners in the different states have taken over the work of the earlier Muzrai departments and hence from their records one should get an exhaustive list of all religious institutions and their histories also.

A number of *Mathas* have been involved in litigation. Judgements in such cases are fruitful sources for the history of the *Mathas*.

Access to the *Matha* Archives

After having located the *Mathas*, the question which arises is how does a scholar get access to the *Matha* archives. So far as *Matha* history which is to be found in judicial records is considered, no problem is involved. He can get a copy of the judgement, if he knows the year and the number of the case. But with regard to access to the archives in the *Mathas*, the problem involved is the same as is to be found in getting access to the records of a private individual. If anything, it is much more complicated by religious and sectarian rivalries. No *Matha* would like to throw open its archives to a follower of the rival *Matha*. By and large, the persons connected with management of the *Mathas* being educated only in the traditional ways, do not appreciate the value of their archives to the historians. They distinguish between two kinds of their records. They value very highly the *Sanads* and the *farmans*. These are written on hand-made paper. Since they are title-deeds to the property of the *Mathas*, the *Gurus* keep them with themselves and show them only to very trusted disciples. The second class of *Matha* archives known as *kadatas* in Sringeri, which are written on cloth, are completely neglected by the authorities. Hence the first care of the scholar when he learns that a *Matha* has archives should be to persuade the authorities to maintain them properly.

His second step should be to win over the confidence of the heads of the *Mathas* and persuade them to throw open their records for the scrutiny of the scholars. This is easier said than done. If the scholar is a disciple of the *Matha* and the head of the *Matha* is liberal then access to the archives becomes easy. Even if the scholar is not a disciple, it is best to approach the *Matha* authorities through their disciples, so that the bonafides of the scholars are established. What the *Matha* authorities are afraid of is that their archives may contain material damaging the prestige of the *Matha*. The authorities argue as to why they should help in lowering the image of their *Matha* themselves, by giving such material to outsiders. But if scholars can assure the authorities that no such damage will be done and nothing will be published without their knowledge, then scrutiny of their archives may be allowed.

Quantity of Records

Writing in the beginning of this century, R. Narasimhachar, then Director of Archaeology in Mysore, said that in the Sringeri *Matha* there were cart-loads of *kadatas* nearly two hundred years old stored in two or three big rooms. Most of this archival wealth is now lost for ever. Ignorant clerks who wanted more space for less important use threw these records into the river. Now only about a sixth of the former collection is available. It is kept properly arranged in a hall. Though they are better taken care of

than earlier, still they are not free from the fear of slow destruction due to climatic changes and ravages of insects. The *kadatas* are divided into two categories. The first category are called *nirupas* or orders of the *Gurus* to their disciples and *binnavattales* or petitions of the disciples to the *Gurus*. The second category consists of Account Books. There are 205 volumes of the first category and 548 volumes of the second category. The Partgali archives examined by Dr. G. H. Khare is equally large containing thousands of documents in Kannada, Marathi and Persian.

Language and Script

The language of the Sringeri records is mostly Kanada. But there are documents in Sanskrit, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu and Persian also. Generally, the letters sent by the *Gurus* used to be in Sanskrit, but the letters written by various rulers and individuals used to be in their respective languages. The *Math's* writers used to copy these in the Kannada script. Though different languages are used, the script is uniformly Kannada excepting few documents which are in Nagari. The script of most of the documents is Kannada Modi. The documents in Kannada in the Partgali *Matha* are in the same script. There are very few people who can read this script now. While the Department of Epigraphy has taken care of the study of stone inscriptions and copper-plate grants and their scripts are read by a number of scholars, it is a pity that we have not made much effort in reading the Kanada script of the *kadatas* of a hundred years old.

Archival Sense of the Early *Matha* Authorities

While modern authorities of the *Matha* lack the archival sense, their predecessors who created the records had it. All the correspondence—of letters received and of replies sent—have been faithfully copied and preserved. What is still more important and pleasing to find is stone inscriptions which have disappeared now have been copied in the records. If we neglect to preserve the *Matha* archives, it means that we have less archival sense than our predecessors. But still we talk glibly of the lack of historical sense of our ancestors and pride ourselves in having it.

Branches of the *Mathas*

The more important *Mathas* have their own branches and these branches also contain their records. This is true of the Sringeri and the Partgali *Mathas*.

Non-archival Wealth of the *Mathas*

In addition to the archives, the *Mathas* contain much that should interest the historian. These are idols, jewellery, coins, vessels of olden times, arms of earlier days, different types of dress gifted by the disciples, weights and measures etc. Some of the *Mathas* contain rare manuscripts and some of these are illustrated by beautiful paintings. If we bestow attention on the archives, the non-archival wealth of the *Mathas* will also come to the notice of the scholars and will be made use of by historians.

Agencies for the Preservation of the Archival and non-archival Wealth of the *Mathas*

The three agencies which can preserve this wealth are the *Mathas* themselves, the State Archives and the National Archives. After the abolition of the Jagirs, the *Mathas*, even if they have the will, which in most cases is absent, do not have the finance to preserve what they have, most of the *Matha* records are essentially of regional interest and therefore it is relevant for the State Archives to take the initiative in preserving the *Matha* archives. The universities and the State Archives should take interest in teaching the scripts in which the *Matha* archives are written and should encourage students to write the history of the well-known *Mathas*. The National Archives has been bringing out National Registers of Private Archives which sometimes include the *Matha* archives. What needs to be done is the Indian Historical Records Commission should set up a Committee to make a list of religious institutions of national importance which have archives. It should also seek the assistance of the Indian Council of Historical Research and the State Archives in preserving archives for posterity and making them available for study.

Bibliographical Note

Information about Sringeri records is to be found in my article which I contributed to the proceedings of the Indian Historical Records Commission in its Patna Session in 1968. The Mysore Gazetteer edited by C. Hayavadana Rao, Vol. V, pp. 1173 to 1194, contains a very valuable account which is based on the reports of R. Narasimhachar, the first discoverer of the Sringeri records. My student A. K. Shastry has learnt how to read the Kannada Modi and his Ph. D thesis entitled *A History of Sringeri, Based on the Kadatas* (1976) is the most recent and authoritative study of the subject. It is a model for similar studies.

For the Partagali *Matha* records, Dr. G. H. Khare's article on the subject in the *Sources of the History of India* Vol. I Ed. S. P. Sen, (Calcutta, 1978) supplements his earlier article "The Archives of the Vaishnava *Matha* of Saraswata Brahmans at Partagali" in the proceedings of the Indian Historical Records Commission, for the year 1951. Mr. Keladi Gunda Jois, Curator of the Keladi Museum, one of the very few scholars apart from Mr. A. K. Shastry mentioned above who learnt it from him, who can read the Kannada Modi, has also examined the Partagali *Matha* archives and his article on this subject has appeared in the Partagali *Matha* Journal "Jivottama". I have made use of a reprint of this article dated 6-3-1976.